

PDGAZETTE

CHRISTMAS

ISSUE

*A collection of Yuletide literature
from the archives of Project Gutenberg.*

- Christmas Trees*, by Robert Frost
The Only Son of His Mother, by Guy Carryl Wetmore
The Tory's Conversion, by Charles M. Skinner
Honey and Myrrh, by Alice Brown
The Christ Church Chimes, by Francis A. Durivage
A Touch of Realism, by Saki
A Christmas Memory, by Charles Dickens
Christmas in the Pines, by Meredith Nicholson
Little Miss Sophie, by Alice Ruth Moore
God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, by Dinah Mulock
The Gracious Time, by William Shakespeare

Christmas Trees

(_A Christmas Circular Letter_)

by Robert Frost, from *Mountain Interval*

The city had withdrawn into itself
And left at last the country to the country;
When between whirls of snow not come to lie
And whirls of foliage not yet laid, there drove
A stranger to our yard, who looked the city,
Yet did in country fashion in that there
He sat and waited till he drew us out
A-buttoning coats to ask him who he was.
He proved to be the city come again
To look for something it had left behind
And could not do without and keep its Christmas.
He asked if I would sell my Christmas trees;
My woods--the young fir balsams like a place
Where houses all are churches and have spires.
I hadn't thought of them as Christmas Trees.
I doubt if I was tempted for a moment
To sell them off their feet to go in cars
And leave the slope behind the house all bare,
Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon.
I'd hate to have them know it if I was.
Yet more I'd hate to hold my trees except
As others hold theirs or refuse for them,
Beyond the time of profitable growth,
The trial by market everything must come to.
I dallied so much with the thought of selling.
Then whether from mistaken courtesy
And fear of seeming short of speech, or whether
From hope of hearing good of what was mine,
I said, "There aren't enough to be worth while."
"I could soon tell how many they would cut,
You let me look them over."

"You could look.
But don't expect I'm going to let you have them."
Pasture they spring in, some in clumps too close
That lop each other of boughs, but not a few
Quite solitary and having equal boughs
All round and round. The latter he nodded "Yes" to,
Or paused to say beneath some lovelier one,
With a buyer's moderation, "That would do."
I thought so too, but wasn't there to say so.
We climbed the pasture on the south, crossed over,
And came down on the north.

He said, "A thousand."

"A thousand Christmas trees!--at what apiece?"

He felt some need of softening that to me:
"A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars."

Then I was certain I had never meant
To let him have them. Never show surprise!
But thirty dollars seemed so small beside
The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents
(For that was all they figured out apiece),
Three cents so small beside the dollar friends
I should be writing to within the hour
Would pay in cities for good trees like those,
Regular vestry-trees whole Sunday Schools
Could hang enough on to pick off enough.
A thousand Christmas trees I didn't know I had!
Worth three cents more to give away than sell,
As may be shown by a simple calculation.
Too bad I couldn't lay one in a letter.
I can't help wishing I could send you one,
In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas.

The Son of His Mother

by Guy Wetmore Carryl, from *Zut and Other Parisians*

IN the limited understanding of Pépin dwelt one great Fact, in the shadow of which all else shrank to insignificance, and that Fact was the existence of Comte Victor de Villersexel, the extremely tall and extraordinarily imposing person who was, first of all, Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, second, Membre de l'Académie Française, and, lastly, father to Pépin himself. It must be acknowledged that to the more observing of his limited kinsfolk and extensive acquaintance the clay feet of Pépin's idol were distinctly in evidence. How he had contrived to attain to the proud eminence which he occupied was, in the earlier days of his publicity, a matter of curious conjecture and not over-plausible explanation. Certainly no inherent merit or ability it was which formed the first step of the stairway he had climbed. In diplomacy the Comte de Villersexel had never bettered his first appointment as second secretary of legation at Belgrade; in literature his achievements were limited to one ponderous work on feudalism, remarkable chiefly for its surpassing futility; and in society his sole claim to consideration lay in his marriage to a Brazilian heiress, who had died within the year, leaving her husband an income of two hundred thousand francs--and Pépin. In all this it was difficult to find a sufficient reason for the crimson button and the green embroidered coat, unless it was that the family of de Villersexel went back to the Crusades. That is not always a prudent thing for a family to do, but the present instance was an exception.

Born to the heritage of a name which his predecessors had made notable, Comte Victor was one of those whose greatness is thrust upon them rather than achieved, one of the bubbles in the ferment of Paris which their very levity brings to the top, to show rainbow tints in the sunlight of publicity. It is probable that no one was more surprised than de Villersexel himself at the honors which fell to his share, but one thing even the most contemptuous had, perforce, to concede. Once secure of his laurels, he wore them with a confidence that was akin to

conviction. His reserve was iron-clad, his dignity stupendous. It required considerable time for new acquaintances to probe the secret of his insufficiency. Victor de Villersexel was, as the irreverent young military attaché at the American Embassy once said of him, "a dazzling imitation of the real thing."

But to Pépin the idol was an idol without flaw. Through what shrewd appreciation of occasional words and chance comments he had contrived to grasp the significance of that speck of scarlet upon the Count's lapel and that apparently simple phrase, "de l'Académie Française," which, in formal introductions, was wont to follow his father's name, must be numbered among childhood's mysteries. But before he was seven, Pépin had solved these problems for himself, and the results of his reasoning were awestruck admiration and blind allegiance to the will of this wonderful creature who never smiled. His own small individuality was so completely overshadowed by that of his father that in the latter's presence the child was scarcely noticeable, dressed in his sober blouses, and creeping about the stately rooms of the great apartment in the avenue d'Iéna with an absolutely noiseless step. He was all brown, was Pépin: brown bare legs, and brown hands, very small and slender, brown hair, cropped short and primly parted, and deep brown eyes, eloquent of unspoken and unspeakable things. He was earnest, his tutor said, earnest and willing, but not bright, poor Pépin! He spoke English, to be sure, with a curious accent caught from his Cornish nurse, but that was due not so much to ability as to enforced association. In his French grammar and such simple arithmetic as was required of him he was slow and often stupid. But he was rarely scolded, and never punished. Once, indeed, the Comte had been about to strike him for some trifling fault, but somehow the blow, for which Pépin stood waiting, never fell.

"He is like his mother," the légionnaire had muttered, as he turned away, "an imbecile--but"--

Pépin, catching the unfinished phrase, grew sick with a great discouragement, mingled with profound pity for the man before him. It must be a dreadful thing for one so famous to be the father of an

imbecile! From that day on the child was more inconspicuous than before.

Deliberately affected in the first instance, what was known in society as de Villersexel's "academic manner" came in course of time to be second nature. Practice made perfect the chill reserve which was originally assumed as a precaution against possible discovery of his vapidity; and as the image of what the academician had been, before his election, grew dimmer in society's recollection, his impressive solemnity, barely disguised by a veneer of superficial courtesy, did not fail of its effect. He was spoken of as a man in whom much lay below the surface, and his more recent acquaintances coupled their estimate of his character with the proverbial profundity of still waters, and the familiar gloved fist of steel. Others, more observant, smiled at the similes, but did not go to the pains of proving them ill applied. One of the most characteristic things about the Comte de Villersexel was that he inspired neither championship nor antagonism.

With all this, he was consistent, with that curious obstinacy which is sometimes made manifest in the shallowest natures. His rôle, once assumed, was, as we have said, played to perfection and never laid aside. The domestic threshold, which is, for the majority of men, a kind of uncloaking room, saw never an alteration, even of voice or expression, in his pose. The household affairs were regulated with almost military precision, and once a day, at noon, Pépin and his father met in the large salon,—the Comte in his tall satin stock and frock coat, and Pépin fresh from the careful hands of his nurse. They shook hands gravely, and then waited in silence, until the maître d'hôtel announced breakfast,—

"Ces messieurs sont servis!"

What meals they were, to be sure, those déjeuners, solemnly served, and more solemnly eaten, under the rigid observation of three menseservants; de Villersexel, with his thin lips, his cold eyes, and his finely pointed gray mustache, barely moving save to raise his fork or break a morsel from his roll, and Pépin, all brown, perched like a mouse on the

edge of a great chair, and nibbling at tiny scraps of food with downcast eyes!

At the very end, as the Comte was about to push back his chair, he would invariably raise his glass of champagne and Pépin his, wherein a few drops of red wine turned the Evian to a pale heliotrope, and together they would glance toward the full-length portrait which hung above the mantel.

"Ta mère!" said the Comte.

"Maman!" replied Pépin.

And so they drank the toast of tribute to the dead.

After breakfast, the father would read for an hour to the child, and Pépin, seated on another large chair, would listen, perfectly motionless, striving desperately to understand the long sentences which fell in flawlessly pronounced succession from the Academician's lips. De Villersexel had a fairly clear recollection of what books had been the companions of his childhood, and these he purchased in the rarest editions, and clothed in the richest bindings, and read to Pépin: only his remembrance did not extend to a very distinct differentiation between seven and fifteen, for it was at the latter age that he read "Télémaque" to himself, and at the former that he read "Télémaque" to his son.

Then would come a second formal handshake, and Pépin, pausing an instant at the door to make a slow, stiff bow, would creep off down the long corridor to the nursery, and the Comte turn again to his papers with a consciousness of paternal duty done.

How Pépin contrived to spend the long hours which his daily walk and his short lessons left at his disposal, only Pépin knew. He talked rarely with the servants,—"a thing," his father told him, "that no gentleman would wish to do;" and other children never entered at the de

Villersexel door, "for," said the Comte, "children sow unfortunate ideas and spread disease."

But there were compensations. One was the full-length portrait over the chimney-piece in the dining-room. Pépin had no conception of how great was the signature it bore, or of the fabulous sum which it had cost, but he knew it was very beautiful, and, besides, it was his mother,--the sad-eyed, pale dream-mother he had never seen.

The portrait of the Comtesse de Villersexel had been one of the sensations at the Salon of seven years before. The young Brazilian was represented at the moment when the bow left the strings of her violin, and on her lips and in her eyes yet dwelt the spirit of the music she had been playing. A clinging gown of ivory-white silk emphasized rather than hid the lines of her figure, of strangely girlish slenderness, but straight and proud as that of a young empress. In its frailty lay the keynote of the portrait's charm. It was like a reflection in clear water that a touch might disturb, or a young anemone that a breath might destroy,--not a picture before which people disputed and proffered noisy opinions, but one which imposed silence, like the barely audible note of a distant Angelus. It stood before the memory of its original, as it had been a spirit, finger on lip, at the doorway of a tomb.

This portrait of his mother dominated the life of Pépin like the half-remembered substance of a dream. He had known nothing of her in the life, for the breath of being had passed from her lips to his at the moment of his birth, but with the intuition of childhood, he seemed to know that this was one who would have loved him and whom he would have loved. He spent hours before the picture, silent, spell-bound, gazing into the deep and tender eyes that shone with the same pathetic pleading that lay so eloquently in his own, and the only outbreak of rage which had ever stirred his simple serenity was on one occasion when his nurse had found him thus absorbed, and, receiving no response to her summons, half alarmed and half indignant, reproached him with wasting his time before a stupid picture. Then Pépin had whirled around upon her, his lips compressed, his small brown hands clenched, and a look in his eyes

that terrified even the stout and prosaic Cornish-woman out of her accustomed attitude of fat complacency.

"A stupid picture?" he stormed. "But it is my mother, do you hear, my mother! You are a wicked woman, Elizabeth!"

It was when Pépin was nearing his seventh birthday that a wonderful thing happened. The Comte was giving a great reception to the Russian Ambassador, and on an impulse which, perhaps, even he himself could hardly have explained, sent for his son. The child was aroused from sleep, and, but half awake and totally uncomprehending, was submitted by the worthy Elizabeth to a veritable cyclone of washing, combing, and brushing, and finally, clad in spotless duck, was led by the maître d'hôtel down the long corridor to the door of the grand salon, which, at his approach, swung open under the touch of one of the under servants. Pépin, dazed by the radiance of many lights and a great clamor of voices, paused on the threshold, and, with a swift intuition of what was demanded of him, made his slow, stiff bow.

"Le Vicomte de Villersexel," said the maître d'hôtel in a loud voice at his side, and Pépin, seeing his father beckon to him from the group where he stood, slipped close to him through the crowd, and was surprised to find that the Comte took his hand in his, and bent forward to say in a whisper,--

"You are to hear Pazzini play the violin. That is why I sent for you. He was your mother's teacher."

Like all that had gone before, what followed was to Pépin like a dream--a beautiful dream, never to be forgotten. A great hush had settled upon the brilliant assemblage, for even in Paris there are still things which society will check its chatter to hear, and the tall, gray-bearded man, consulting with the pianist over there, was Pazzini, the great Pazzini, whose services had been more than once commanded by royalty in vain. De Villersexel had drawn Pépin nearer to the piano in the brief interval, and as the opening chords of the introduction were

struck, he found himself but a few feet from the famous violinist, his hand still linked in that of his father, his eyes fixed in wonder upon this unknown man who had been his mother's teacher.

The first low note of the violin fell upon the silence like a faint, far voice, heard across a wide reach of calm water, and, as the marvelous melody swelled into the fullness of its motif, something new and strange stirred in Pépin's heart, mounted and tightened in his throat, ran tingling to his finger-tips. Through his half parted lips the breath tiptoed in and out, and his deep eyes grew every instant, could he have known it, more like those of the picture that he loved. So he stood entranced, seeing, hearing nothing but Pazzini and Pazzini's violin, till the sonata drew imperceptibly toward its close. Like the child, the great violinist seemed to be unconscious of all that surrounded him. Slowly, tenderly, he led his music through the last phrases, until he paused before the supreme high sweetness of the final note. How it was he could never have told, but, in that infinitesimal fraction of time, the training of years played him false. He knew that his finger-tip slipped an incalculable atom of space, but it was too late. The bow was on the string, and the imperceptibly flatted note swelled, sank, and died away, unrecognized, he thought, with a throb of thankfulness, by any save his master ear. And then--

"_Ah-h!_" said Pépin.

The long ripple of applause drowned the child's whisper, and for an instant the terror in his heart grew still, believing his exclamation unheard. Then it leaped to life again, for Pazzini was looking at him, his bow hovering above the instrument like his mother's in the picture. In the mysterious solitude of the crowded room the eyes of these two met, each reading the other's as they had been an open book, and in Pépin's was the pain of a wounded animal, and in Pazzini's a great wonder and sorrow, as of one who has hurt without intention, and mutely pleads for pardon.

As the applause ceased, the violinist turned to the Comte, and pointed

to Pépin with his bow.

"Who is that child?" he asked.

The thaw in the de Villersexel's "academic manner" had been but momentary. With the renewed hum of conversation he was himself again, pale, proud, and immovable.

"It is my son, Pépin," he replied, with stiff courtesy. "How shall I thank you for your playing? It was the essence of perfection, as it has ever been, and ever will be."

But he could not know, as he turned away with Pépin, that in his heart the violinist said, "Her boy! I understand!"

The miracle of his summons to the salon that night was not, as it appeared, the actual climax of existence, for a new marvel awaited Pépin on the morrow. The doors of the dining-room had barely slid together behind them when the Comte turned to him.

"Yesterday was Christmas," he said.

Pépin made no reply. In fact, the stupor which descended upon him at this infraction of the usual routine of life effectually deprived him, for the moment, of the power of speech.

"It was Christmas," repeated the Comte, "and because of that you are invited to a--a--soirée to-day. Do you know the English children on the entresol?"

"I have seen them," faltered Pépin, "but we have never spoken. You told me"--

"I have changed my mind," broke in his father. "Monsieur 'Ameelton"--stumbling desperately over the English name--"has asked me to let you visit them this afternoon, and I have said yes to him.

Elizabeth will dress you. Now you may go."

Barely conscious that Pépin had added a timid "Merci, papa!" to his customary bow, de Villersexel turned to his writing-table, as the door closed behind the little Vicomte, and, unlocking a drawer, took therefrom a letter which had come to him that morning, and, burying himself in his arm-chair, proceeded to its careful reperusal. It was in the fine Italian handwriting of Pazzini, and ran as follows:--

MY DEAR FRIEND,--This is to be at once a confession and a prayer. What would you say if I were to tell you that Pazzini--the flawless Pazzini, as men are pleased to call me!--murdered, yes, murdered last night's sonata by flattening that wonderful final note? Oh, it was a very little thing, and passed unnoticed, for they are stupid, these wise people who listen to me, and they did not hear. Even you, my poor friend, even you could not detect that tiny flaw that was a monstrous crime. No, of all who listened, there were but two that understood what I had done. I was one of these, and the other was your son--Pépin.

Do you know what that means, Monsieur le Comte de Villersexel? Do you understand that it is but one ear in millions that is so finely keyed that this minutest deviation could wound it like the most utter discord? And I wounded him, your Pépin. I saw it in his eyes. Therefore I tell you--I, who know--that he is a genius, a genius greater than his mother, and that, like her, he must be my pupil. I have none other now. It shall be the work of my old age to make him the greatest violinist of his day. Give him to me, my friend, if not for his own sake, then for hers!

PAZZINI.

Prime feature of all the year to the little Hamiltons, on the entresol, was their Christmas tree. It arrived in some unknowable way in the corner of the grand salon on the morning after Christmas, and, from the moment of its advent, the doors were sealed, and only the privileged

world of grown-ups went in and out, and could see the splendors within. Inch by inch the hands of the tall clock in the antichambre dragged themselves around successive circles toward the hour of revelation, and, keyed to the snapping point of frenzy, the slender figure of George and the round, squat form of John stood motionless before the inexorable timepiece, awaiting the stroke of four. This suspense was harrowing enough in itself, and only made bearable by recourse to occasional mad caperings up and down the hall, and whoops of mingled ecstasy and exasperation. What was worse was the delay in the arrival of their guests. Later, the latter would be an indispensable part of the festivities: just now they were mere impediments in the path of bliss. Even the grown-ups were more considerate, and came on time. Well they might, since they were granted immediate admission to the enchanted room, and came out with maddening accounts of what was to be seen therein. They sat about the small salon, and talked the stupid things of which they were so fond of talking.--Hamilton, tall, straight, and with an amused twinkle in his eyes, while he watched his wife vainly endeavoring to calm her sons as they foamed and pranced at the sealed doors; Miss Kedgwick, who wrote books, and invited boys to tea; Monsieur de Bercy, who was odd because he spoke no English, but who cut heads out of nuts and apples, and drew droll pictures on scraps of paper; Miss Lys, who played the piano for "Going to Jerusalem;" and Mr. Sedgely, who talked very low in her ear, and said the great trouble with "Going to Jerusalem" was that the players couldn't go there in good earnest--whatever that might mean.

But would the doors _never_ open?

The children arrived by twos and threes, shook hands limply with their elders, greeted their small hosts with embarrassed ceremony, and then, as if suddenly inoculated with the latter's madness, commenced to foam and prance in their turn before the unyielding portals. Last of all came Pépin, all brown, who bowed at the door, and then in turn to each of those who spoke to him.

Suddenly, with a shout, the children burst through the opened doorway, and gathered in voluble groups about the glistening miracle which shone like a hundred stars in the gathering twilight. For a half hour all was chaos, and Pépin, standing a little apart, marveled and was still. Dancing figures whirled about him, bearing boxes of soldiers, toy villages, dolls, trumpets, drums. The air was full of the wailing of whistles, the cries of mechanical animals, and the clamor of childish comment.

But to Pépin even the dazzling novelty of his surroundings was as nothing, compared to one object which drew and fixed his attention from the first instant, as the needle is held rigid by the magnetic pole. High up upon the tree, clearly outlined against its background of deep green, and gleaming gorgeously with fresh varnish in the light of the surrounding candles, hung a violin--not one like Monsieur Pazzini's, large and of a dull brown, but small--a violin for Pépin himself to hold, and new, and bright, and beyond all things beautiful and to be desired!

Then his attention was distracted for a moment. From the time of his entrance the eyes of Miss Lys had followed the dignified and silent little Frenchman, and where Miss Lys went Mr. Sedgely followed, so that now the two were so close that they brushed his elbow, and Pépin, turning with an instinctive "Pardon," saw that they were watching him curiously. When, with a feeling of restlessness under their scrutiny, he looked once more towards the tree, the violin was gone! An instant later, he saw it in the madly sawing hands of George Hamilton, dancing like a faun down the room, and he was conscious of a great faintness, such as he had known but once before,--when he had cut his hand, and the doctor had sewed it, as Elizabeth sewed rips in cloth.

"He is adorable," said Ethel Lys, "but I have never seen a sadder face. What eyes!--two brown poems."

"He makes my heart ache," answered Sedgely, slowly, "and yet I could hardly say why. Ask him what he wants off the tree."

The girl was on her knees by Pépin before the phrase was fairly finished.

"What didst thou have for Christmas?" she asked, falling unconsciously into that tender second singular which slips so naturally from the lips at sight of a French child.

"I?--but nothing," replied the little Vicomte, pleased out of his anguish by the sound of his own tongue amid the babel of English phrases.

The girl at his side looked at him with so frank an astonishment that he felt it necessary to explain.

"I have my gifts on the day of the year. Christmas is an English fête, and I am French. So I have nothing."

"Nothing!" replied Miss Lys blankly, and then, of a sudden, slipped her arm around him, and drew his head close to her own.

"What dost thou see on the tree that thou wouldst like to have?" she asked, eagerly. "What is there, dearest?"

And, at the unwonted tenderness of her question, the floodgates of Pépin's reserve suddenly gave way. Placing his hands upon the girl's shoulders, he searched her face with his eyes.

"If there were another violin"--he began, and, faltering, stopped, and turned away to hide the tears that would come, strive as he might to hold them back.

"Did you _hear_ him--and _see_ him?" queried Miss Lys, a minute after, furiously backing Sedgely into a corner by the lapels of his frock coat.

"You _did_--you _know_ you did! And you are still here? Lord! _What_ a man!"

Sedgely shrugged his shoulders with a pretense of utter bewilderment.

"What must I do?" he inquired, blankly.

"_Do?_" stormed Miss Lys. "_Do?_" Why, scour Paris till you find a violin precisely like that one George is doing his best to saw in half. Here! Clément is at the door with the trois-quarts. Tell him to drive you like mad to the Printemps--to the big place opposite the Grand Hotel--to the Louvre--to the Bon Marché--anywhere--everywhere! But inside of one hour I must have that violin!"

When Sedgely returned, thirty minutes later, violin in hand, Ethel met him at the door.

"They are all at tea," she said. "We'll call Pépin out."

She placed the violin in the hands of the Vicomte without a word, and without a word Pépin took it from her. The instrument slid to his cheek as if impelled by its own desire.

"Canst thou play?" she asked him.

"No," said Pépin, "and, besides, it is but a toy. I do not want to hear it. But I like to feel it--here." And he moved his cheek caressingly against the cheap varnish.

"Don't you think you might"--began Sedgely, and then found himself on the other side of the door, and Miss Lys facing him with an air of hopeless resignation.

"I--act-u-ally--be-lieve," she said, with an effort at calm, "that you were going to ask him to thank me for it!"

"Why not?" said Sedgely.

"_Lord!_ What a man!" said Miss Lys.

* * * * *

In the dining-room of the de Villersexel apartment the Comte paced slowly to and fro, with bent head, and fingers that locked and unlocked behind his back. In the heavy chair before the fire, Pazzini seemed shrunk to but half his normal size, a mere rack of clothes, two lean white hands, that gripped the dragons' heads upon the arms of the fauteuil, and a pale stern face that looked into the smouldering embers, and beyond--immeasurably beyond.

"How did it happen?" he asked, after a time.

"Shall I ever know?" broke out de Villersexel irritably. "Pépin had been to a children's party below there on the entresol, at the English lawyer's. He and his imbecile of a bonne were entering the ascenseur. She goes from spasm to spasm, so there is no telling. But it seems they had given Pépin a toy--the English--and she wished to carry it and he refused. So between them--God knows how!--it slipped from their hands as the ascenseur cleared the gate--and Pépin stooped to catch it--and fell. He died at midnight."

There was a long silence, broken only by the snapping of the logs in the fireplace and the almost inaudible footfalls of the Comte on the thick carpet. Then--

"He was his mother's son," said Pazzini.

"And mine," replied the other. "The last of the de Villersexel."

He paused abruptly by a little table, and took up a handful of splintered wood and tangled catgut.

"The toy that killed him," he added in a low voice, and hurled the fragments over Pazzini's shoulder into the embers. A thin tongue of

flame caught at them as they fell, and broke into a brilliant blaze. Pazzini leaned forward suddenly and peered at the little conflagration.

"A violin," he said.

"A violin," echoed the Comte. "Think of dying for a violin!"

Pazzini made no reply. His eyes had met those of the portrait over the chimney--and he was smiling.

The Tory's Conversion

by Charles M. Skinner, from *Myths And Legends Of Our Own Land*

In his firelit parlor, in his little house at Valley Forge, old Michael Kuch sits talking with his daughter. But though it is Christmas eve the talk has little cheer in it. The hours drag on until the clock strikes twelve, and the old man is about to offer his evening prayer for the safety of his son, who is one of Washington's troopers, when hurried steps are heard in the snow, there is a fumbling at the latch, then the door flies open and admits a haggard, panting man who hastily closes it again, falls into a seat, and shakes from head to foot. The girl goes to him. "John!" she says. But he only averts his face. "What is wrong with thee, John Blake?" asks the farmer. But he has to ask again and again ere he gets an answer. Then, in a broken voice, the trembling man confesses that he has tried to shoot Washington, but the bullet struck and killed his only attendant, a dragoon. He has come for shelter, for men are on his track already. "Thou know'st I am neutral in this war, John Blake," answered the farmer,— "although I have a boy down yonder in the camp. It was a cowardly thing to do, and I hate you Tories that you do not fight like men; yet, since you ask me for a hiding-place, you shall have it, though, mind you, 'tis more on the girl's account than yours. The men are coming. Out—this way—to the spring-house. So!"

Before old Michael has time to return to his chair the door is again thrust open, this time by men in blue and buff. They demand the assassin, whose footsteps they have tracked there through the snow. Michael does not answer. They are about to use violence when, through the open door, comes Washington, who checks them with a word. The general bears a drooping form with a blood splash on its breast, and deposits it on the hearth as gently as a mother puts a babe into its cradle. As the firelight falls on the still face the farmer's eyes grow round and big; then he shrieks and drops upon his knees, for it is his son who is lying there. Beside him is a pistol; it was dropped by the Tory when he entered. Grasping it eagerly the farmer leaps to his feet. His years have fallen from him. With a tiger-like bound he gains the door, rushes to the spring-house where John Blake is crouching, his eyes sunk and shining, gnawing his fingers in a craze of dismay. But though hate is swift,

love is swifter, and the girl is there as soon as he. She strikes his arm aside, and the bullet he has fired lodges in the wood. He draws out his knife, and the murderer, to whom has now come the calmness of despair, kneels and offers his breast to the blade. Before he can strike, the soldiers hasten up, and seizing Blake, they drag him to the house—the little room—where all had been so peaceful but a few minutes before.

The culprit is brought face to face with Washington, who asks him what harm he has ever suffered from his fellow countrymen that he should turn against them thus. Blake hangs his head and owns his willingness to die. His eyes rest on the form extended on the floor, and he shudders; but his features undergo an almost joyous change, for the figure lifts itself, and in a faint voice calls, "Father!" The young man lives. With a cry of delight both father and sister raise him in their arms. "You are not yet prepared to die," says Washington to the captive. "I will put you under guard until you are wanted. Take him into custody, my dear young lady, and try to make an American of him. See, it is one o'clock, and this is Christmas morning. May all be happy here. Come." And beckoning to his men he rides away, though Blake and his affianced would have gone on their knees before him. Revulsion of feeling, love, thankfulness and a latent patriotism wrought a quick change in Blake. When young Kuch recovered Blake joined his regiment, and no soldier served the flag more honorably.

Honey and Myrrh

by Alice Brown, from *Tiverton Tales*

The neighborhood, the township, and the world had been snowed in. Snow drifted the road in hills and hollows, and hung in little eddying wreaths, where the wind took it, on the pasture slopes. It made solid banks in the dooryards, and buried the stone walls out of sight. The lacework of its fantasy became daintily apparent in the conceits with which it brodered over all the common objects familiar in homely lives. The pump, in yards where that had supplanted the old-fashioned curb, wore a heavy mob-cap. The vane on the barn was delicately sifted over, and the top of every picket in the high front-yard fence had a fluffy peak. But it was chiefly in the woods that the rapture and flavor of the time ran riot in making beauty. There every fir branch swayed under a tuft of white, and the brown refuse of the year was all hidden away.

That morning, no one in Tiverton Hollow had gone out of the house, save to shovel paths, and do the necessary chores. The road lay untouched until ten o'clock, when a selectman gave notice that it was an occasion for "breakin' out," by starting with his team, and gathering oxen by the way until a conquering procession ground through the drifts, the men shoveling at intervals where the snow lay deepest, the oxen walking swayingly, head to the earth, and the faint wreath of their breath ascending and cooling on the air. It was "high times" in Tiverton Hollow when a road needed opening; some idea of the old primitive way of battling with the untouched forces of nature roused the people to an exhilaration dashed by no uncertainty of victory.

By afternoon, the excitement had quieted. The men had come in, reddened by cold, and eaten their noon dinner in high spirits, retailing to the less fortunate women-folk the stories swapped on the march. Then, as one man, they succumbed to the drowsiness induced by a morning of wind in the face, and sat by the stove under some pretense of reading the county paper, but really to nod and doze, waking only to put another

stick of wood on the fire. So passed all the day before Christmas, and in the evening the shining lamps were lighted (each with a strip of red flannel in the oil, to give color), and the neighborhood rested in the tranquil certainty that something had really come to pass, and that their communication with the world was reestablished.

Susan Peavey sat by the fire, knitting on a red mitten, and the young schoolmaster presided over the other hearth corner, reading very hard, at intervals, and again sinking into a drowsy study of the flames. There was an impression abroad in Tiverton that the schoolmaster was going to be somebody, some time. He wrote for the papers. He was always receiving through the mail envelopes marked "author's proofs," which, the postmistress said, indicated that he was an author, whatever proofs might be. She had an idea they might have something to do with photographs; perhaps his picture was going into a book. It was very well understood that teaching school at the Hollow, at seven dollars a week, was an interlude in the life of one who would some day write a spelling-book, or exercise senatorial rights at Washington. He was a long-legged, pleasant looking youth, with a pale cheek, dark eyes, and thick black hair, one lock of which, hanging low over his forehead, he twisted while he read. He kept glancing up at Miss Susan and smiling at her, whenever he could look away from his book and the fire, and she smiled back. At last, after many such wordless messages, he spoke.

"What lots of red mittens you do knit! Do you send them all away to that society?"

Miss Susan's needles clicked.

"Every one," said she.

She was a tall, large woman, well-knit, with no superfluous flesh. Her head was finely set, and she carried it with a simple unconsciousness better than dignity. Everybody in Tiverton thought it had been a great cross to Susan Peavey to be so overgrown. They conceded that it was a mystery she had not turned out "gormin'." But that was because Susan

had left her vanity behind with early youth, in the days when, all legs and arms, she had given up the idea of beauty. Her face was strong-featured, overspread by a healthy color, and her eyes looked frankly out, as if assured of finding a very pleasant world. The sick always delighted in Susan's nearness; her magnificent health and presence were like a supporting tide, and she seemed to carry outdoor air in her very garments. The schoolmaster still watched her. She rested and fascinated him at once by her strength and homely charm.

"I shall call you the Orphans' Friend," said he.

She laid down her work.

"Don't you say one word," she answered, with an air of abject confession. "It don't interest me a mite! I give because it's my bounden duty, but I'll be whipped if I want to knit warm mittens all my life, an' fill poor barrels. Sometimes I wisht I could git a chance to provide folks with what they don't need ruther'n what they do."

"I don't see what you mean," said the schoolmaster. "Tell me."

Miss Susan was looking at the hearth. A warmer flush than that of firelight alone lay on her cheek. She bent forward and threw on a pine knot. It blazed richly. Then she drew the cricket more securely under her feet, and settled herself to gossip.

"Anybody'd think I'd most talked myself out sence you come here to board," said she, "but you're the beatemest for tolin' anybody on. I never knew I had so much to say. But there! I guess we all have, if there's anybody 't wants to listen. I never've said this to a livin' soul, an' I guess it's sort o' heathenish to think, but I'm tired to death o' fightin' ag'inst poverty, poverty! I s'pose it's there, fast enough, though we're all so well on 't we don't realize it; an' I'm goin' to do my part, an' be glad to, while I'm above ground. But I guess heaven'll be a spot where we don't give folks what they need, but what they don't."

"There is something in your Bible," began the schoolmaster hesitatingly, "about a box of precious ointment." He always said "your Bible," as if church members held a proprietary right.

"That's it!" replied Miss Susan, brightening. "That's what I al'ays thought. Spill it all out, I say, an' make the world smell as sweet as honey. My! but I do have great projicks settin' here by the fire alone! Great projicks!"

"Tell me some!

"Well, I dunno's I can, all of a piece, so to speak; but when it gits along towards eight o'clock, an' the room's all simmerin', an' the moon lays out on the snow, it does seem as if we made a pretty poor spec' out o' life. We don't seem to have no color in it. Why, don't you remember 'Solomon in all his glory'? I guess 't wouldn't ha' been put in jest that way if there wa'n't somethin' in it. I s'pose he had crowns an' rings an' purple velvet coats an' brocade satin weskits, an' all manner o' things. Sometimes seems as I could see him walkin' straight in through that door there." She was running a knitting needle back and forth through her ball of yarn as she spoke, without noticing that some one had been stamping the snow from his feet on the doorstone outside. The door, after making some bluster of refusal, was pushed open, and on the heels of her speech a man walked in.

"My land!" cried Miss Susan, aghast. Then she and the schoolmaster, by one accord, began to laugh.

But the man did not look at them until he had scrupulously wiped his feet on the husk mat, and stamped them anew. Then he turned down the legs of his trousers, and carefully examined the lank green carpet-bag he had been carrying.

"I guess I trailed it through some o' the drifts," he remarked. "The road's pretty narrer, this season o' the year."

"You give us a real start," said Susan. "We thought be sure 'twas Solomon, an' mebbe the Queen o' Sheba follerin' arter. Why, Solon Slade, you ain't walked way over to Tiverton Street!"

"Yes, I have," asserted Solon. He was a slender, sad-colored man, possibly of her own age, and he spoke in a very soft voice. He was Susan's widowed brother-in-law, and the neighbors said he was clever, but hadn't no more spunk 'n a wet rag.

Susan had risen and laid down her knitting. She approached the table and rested one hand on it, a hawk-like brightness in her eyes.

"What you got in that bag?" asked she.

Solon was enjoying his certainty that he held the key to the situation.

"I got a mite o' cheese," he answered, approaching the fire and spreading his hands to the blaze.

"You got anything else? Now, Solon, don't you keep me here on tenter-hooks! You got a letter?"

"Well," said Solon, "I thought I might as well look into the post-office an' see."

"You thought so! You went a-purpose! An' you walked because you al'ays was half shackled about takin' horses out in bad goin'. You hand me over that letter!"

Solon approached the table, a furtive twinkle in his blue eyes. He lifted the bag and opened it slowly. First, he took out a wedge-shaped package.

"That's the cheese," said he. "Herb."

"My land!" ejaculated Miss Susan, while the schoolmaster looked on and smiled. "You better ha' come to me for cheese. I've got a plenty, tansy an' sage, an' you know it. I see it! There! you gi' me holt on 't!" It was a fugitive white gleam in the bottom of the bag; she pounced upon it and brought up a letter. Midway in the act of tearing it open, she paused and looked at Solon with droll entreaty. "It's your letter, by rights!" she added tentatively.

"Law!" said he, "I dunno who it's directed to, but I guess it's as much your'n as anybody's."

Miss Susan spread open the sheets with an air of breathless delight. She bent nearer the lamp. "'Dear father and auntie,'" she began.

"There!" remarked Solon, in quiet satisfaction, still warming his hands at the blaze. "There! you see _'tis_ to both."

"My! how she does run the words together! Here!" Miss Susan passed it to the schoolmaster. "You read it. It's from Jenny. You know she's away to school, an' we didn't think best for her to come home Christmas. I knew she'd write for Christmas. Solon, I told you so!"

The schoolmaster took the letter, and read it aloud. It was a simple little message, full of contentment and love and a girl's new delight in life. When he had finished, the two older people busied themselves a moment without speaking, Solon in picking up a chip from the hearth, and Susan in mechanically smoothing the mammoth roses on the side of the carpetbag.

"Well, I 'most wish we'd had her come home," said he at last, clearing his throat.

"No, you don't either," answered Miss Susan promptly. "Not with this snow, an' comin' out of a house where it's het up, into cold beds an' all. Now I'm goin' to git you a mite o' pie an' some hot tea."

She set forth a prodigal supper on a leaf of the table, and Solon silently worked his will upon it, the schoolmaster eating a bit for company. Then Solon took his way home to the house across the yard, and she watched at the window till she saw the light blaze up through his panes. That accomplished, she turned back with a long breath and began clearing up.

"I'm worried to death to have him over there all by himself," said she. "S'pose he should be sick in the night!"

"You'd got over," answered the schoolmaster easily.

"Well, s'pose he couldn't git me no word?"

"Oh, you'd know it! You 're that sort."

Miss Susan laughed softly, and so seemed to put away her recurrent anxiety. She came back to her knitting.

"How long has his wife been dead?" asked the schoolmaster.

"Two year. He an' Jenny got along real well together, but sence September, when she went away, I guess he's found it pretty dull pickin'. I do all I can, but land! 't ain't like havin' a woman in the house from sunrise to set."

"There's nothing like that," agreed the wise young schoolmaster. "Now let's play some more. Let's plan what we'd like to do to-morrow for all the folks we know, and let's not give them a thing they need, but just the ones they'd like."

Miss Susan put down her knitting again. She never could talk to the schoolmaster and keep at work. It made her dreamy, exactly as it did to sit in the hot summer sunshine, with the droning of bees in the air.

"Well," said she, "there's old Ann Wheeler that lives over on the

turnpike. She don't want for nothin', but she keeps her things packed away up garret, an' lives like a pig."

"Sold her bed and lay in the straw."

"That's it, on'y she won't sell nuthin'. I'd give her a house all winders, so 't she couldn't help lookin' out, an' velvet carpets 't she'd got to walk on."

"Well, there's Cap'n Ben. The boys say he's out of his head a good deal now; he fancies himself at sea and in foreign countries."

"Yes, so they say. Well, I'd let him set down a spell in Solomon's temple an' look round him. My sake! do you remember about the temple? Why, the nails was all gold. Don't you wish we'd lived in them times? Jest think about the wood they had--cedars o' Lebanon an' fir-trees. You know how he set folks to workin' in the mountains. I've al'ays thought I'd like to ben up on them mountains an' heard the axes ringin' an' listened to the talk. An' then there was pomegranates an' cherubim, an' as for silver an' gold, they were as common as dirt. When I was a little girl, I learnt them chapters, an' sometimes now, when I'm settin' by the fire, I say over that verse about the 'man of Tyre, skillful to work in gold, and in silver, in brass, in iron, in stone, and in timber, in purple, in blue, and in fine linen, and in crimson.' My! ain't it rich?"

She drew a long breath of surfeited enjoyment. The schoolmaster's eyes burned under his heavy brows.

"Then things smelt so good in them days," continued Miss Susan. "They had myrrh an' frankincense, an' I dunno what all. I never make my mincemeat 'thout snuffin' at the spice-box to freshen up my mind. No matter where I start, some way or another I al'ays git back to Solomon. Well, if Cap'n Ben wants to see foreign countries, I guess he'd be glad to set a spell in the temple. Le's have on another stick--that big one thereby you. My! it's the night afore Christmas, ain't it? Seems if

I couldn't git a big enough blaze. Pile it on. I guess I'd as soon set the chimby afire as not!"

There was something overflowing and heady in her enjoyment. It exhilarated the schoolmaster, and he lavished stick after stick on the ravening flames. The maple hardened into coals brighter than its own panoply of autumn; the delicate bark of the birch flared up and perished.

"Miss Susan," said he, "don't you want to see all the people in the world?"

"Oh, I dunno! I'd full as lieves set here an' think about 'em. I can fix 'em up full as well in my mind, an' perhaps they suit me better 'n if I could see 'em. Sometimes I set 'em walkin' through this kitchen, kings an' queens an' all. My! how they do shine, all over precious stones. I never see a di'mond, but I guess I know pretty well how't would look."

"Suppose we could give a Christmas dinner,--what should we have?"

"We'd have oxen roasted whole, an' honey--an'--but that's as fur as I can git."

The schoolmaster had a treasury of which she had never learned, and he said musically:--

... "a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucid syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
From Fez; and spicéd dainties, every one,
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon."

"Yes, that has a real nice sound. It ain't like the Bible, but it's

nice."

They sat and dreamed and the fire flared up into living arabesques and burnt blue in corners. A stick parted and fell into ash, and Miss Susan came awake. She had the air of rousing herself with vigor.

"There!" said she, "sometimes I think it's most sinful to make believe, it's so hard to wake yourself up. After all this, I dunno but when Solon comes for the pigs' kittle to-morrow, I shall ketch myself sayin', 'Here's the frankincense!'"

They laughed together, and the schoolmaster rose to light his lamp. He paused on his way to the stairs, and came back to set it down again.

"There are lots of people we haven't provided for," he said. "We haven't even thought what we'd give Jenny."

"I guess Jenny's got her heart's desire." Miss Susan nodded sagely. "I've sent her a box, with a fruit-cake an' pickles and cheese. She's all fixed out."

The schoolmaster hesitated, and turned the lamp-wick up and down. Then he spoke, somewhat timidly, "What should you like to give her father?"

Miss Susan's face clouded with that dreamy look which sometimes settled upon her eyes like haze.

"Well," said she, "I guess whatever I should give him'd only make him laugh."

"Flowers--and velvet--and honey--and myrrh?"

"Yes," answered Miss Susan with gravity. "Perhaps it's jest as well some things ain't to be had at the shops."

The schoolmaster took up his lamp again and walked to the door.

"We never can tell," he said. "It may be people want things awfully without knowing it. And suppose they do laugh! They'd better laugh than cry. _I_ should give all I could. Good-night."

Miss Susan banked up the fire and set her rising of dough on the hearth, after a discriminating peep to see whether it was getting on too fast. After that, she covered her plants by the window and blew out the light, so that the moon should have its way. She lingered for a moment, looking out into a glittering world. Not a breath stirred. The visible universe lay asleep, and only beauty waked. She was aching with a tumultuous emotion--the sense that life might be very fair and shining, if we only dared to shape it as it seems to us in dreams. The loveliness and repose of the earth appealed to her like a challenge; they alone made it seem possible for her also to dare.

Next morning, she rose earlier than usual, while the schoolmaster was still fast bound in sleep. She stayed only to start her kitchen fire, and then stood motionless a moment for a last decision. The great white day was beginning outside with slow, unconscious royalty. The pale winter dawn yielded to a flush of rose; nothing in the aspect of the heavens contradicted the promise of the night before. It seemed to her a wonderful day, dramatic, visible in peace, because, on that morning, all the world was thinking of the world and not of individual desires. She went to the bureau drawer in the sitting-room and looked, a little scornfully, at two packages hidden there. Handkerchiefs for the schoolmaster, stockings and gloves for Solon! Shutting the drawer, she hurried out into the kitchen, snatching her scissors from the work-basket by the way. She gave herself no time to think, but went up to her flower-stand and began to cut the geranium blossoms and the rose. The fuchsias hung in flaunting grace. They were dearer to her than all. She snipped them recklessly, and because the bunch seemed meagre still, broke the top from her sweet-scented geranium and disposed the flowers hastily in the midst. Her posy was sweet-smelling and good; it spoke to the heart. Putting a shawl over her head, she rolled the flowers in her apron from the frost, and stepped out into

the brilliant day. The little cross-track between her house and the other was snowed up; but she took the road and, hurrying between banks of carven whiteness, went up Solon's path to the side door. She walked in upon him where he was standing over the kitchen stove, warming his hands at the first blaze. Susan's cheeks were red with the challenge of the stinging air, but she had the look of one who, living by a larger law, has banished the foolishness of fear. She walked straight up to him and proffered him her flowers.

"Here, Solon," she said, "it's Christmas. I brought you these."

Solon looked at her and at them, in slow surprise. He put out both hands and took them awkwardly.

"Well!" he said, "Well!"

Susan was smiling at him. It seemed to her at that moment that the world was a very rich place, because you may take all you want and give all you choose, while nobody is the wiser.

"Well," remarked Solon again, "I guess I'll put 'em into water." He laid them down on a chair. "Susan, do you remember that time I walked over to Pine Hill to pick you some mayflowers, when you was gittin' over the lung fever?"

She nodded.

"Susan," said he desperately, "what if I should ask you to forgit old scores an' begin all over?"

"I ain't laid up anything," answered Susan, looking him full in the face with her brilliant smile.

"There's suthin' I've wanted to tell ye, this two year. I never s'posed you knew, but that night I kissed your sister in the entry an' asked her, I thought 't was you."

"Yes, I knew that well enough I was in the buttry and heard it all. There, let's not talk about it."

Solon came a step nearer.

"But will you, Susan?" he persisted. "Will you? I know Jenny'd like it."

"I guess she would, too," said Susan. "There! we don't need to talk no further! You come over to breakfast, won't you? I'm goin' to fry chicken. It's Christmas mornin'." She nodded at him and went out, walking perhaps more proudly than usual down the shining path. Solon, regardless of his cooling kitchen, stood at the door and watched her. Solon never said very much, but he felt as if life were beginning all over again, just as he had wished to make it at the very start. He forgot his gray hair and furrowed face, just as he forgot the cold and snow. It was the spring of the year.

When Miss Susan entered her kitchen, the schoolmaster had come down and was putting a stick of wood into the stove.

"Merry Christmas!" he called, "and here's something for you."

A long white package lay on the table at the end where her plate was always set. She opened it with delicate touches, it seemed so precious.

"My sake!" said she. "It's a fan!" She lifted it out, and the fragrance of an Eastern wood filled all the room. She swept open the feathers. They were white and wonderful.

"It was never used except by one very beautiful woman," said the schoolmaster, without looking at her. "She was a good deal older than I; but somehow she seemed to belong to me. She died, and I thought I should like to have you keep this."

Susan was waving it back and forth before her face, stirring the air to fragrance. Her eyes were full of dreams. "My! ain't it rich!" she murmured. "The Queen o' Sheba never had no better. An' Solon's comin' over to breakfast."

The Christ Church Chimes

by Francis A. Durivage, from *The Three Brides & Other Tales*

It was a cold winter evening. The chill blast came sweeping from the chain of hills that guard our city on the north, laden with the cold breath of a thousand leagues of ice and snow. There was a sharp, polar glitter in the myriad stars that wheeled on their appointed course through the dark blue heaven, in whose expanse no single cloud was visible. Howling through the icy streets came the strong, wild north wind, tearing in its fierce frenzy the sailcloth awnings into tatters, swinging the public-house signs, and shaking the window shutters, like a bold burglar bent on the perpetration of crime. Then onward, onward it sped over the dark steel-colored bay, and out to the wild, wide, open sea, to do battle with the sails of the stanch barks that were struggling towards a haven.

But within, the good people of Boston were stoutly waging battle against the common enemy on this bitter Christmas eve. In some of the old-fashioned houses at the North End, inhabited by old-fashioned people, the ruddy light that streamed through the parlor windows on the street announced that huge fires of oak and hickory were blazing on the ample hearths. But in far the greater number of dwellings, the less genial, but more powerful anthracite was contending with the wintry elements.

In an upper room of an old, crazy, wooden house, a poor woman, thinly clad, sat sewing beside a rusty, sheet-iron stove, poorly supplied with chips. She had been once eminently handsome, and but for the wanness and hollowness of her face, would have appeared so still.

Two little boys, of eight and nine years of age, were warming themselves, or seeking to warm themselves, at the stove, before retiring to their little bed in a small room adjoining.

"Isn't this nice, mother?" said the younger, a bright, black-eyed boy.

"Didn't I get a nice lot of chips to-day?"

"Yes, dearest, you are always a good and industrious boy," said the mother, snatching a moment from her work to imprint a kiss upon his forehead.

"Poor pa' will have a nice fire to warm him when he comes home," said the elder boy.

At this allusion to the child's father, the mother burst into tears. The countenances of both the children fell. They knew too well the cause of their mother's bitter sorrow--the same cause had blighted their own young hearts and clouded their innocent lives--their father was a drunkard! Hence it was that, bright and intelligent as they were, they could not go to school--they were too ragged for that--and their time was required on the wharves to pick up fuel and such scraps of provision as are scattered from the sheaves of the prosperous and prodigal. For this reason, too, the mother had carefully forbore to remind the children that this was Christmas eve. But they knew it too well, and they contrasted its gloominess and sorrow with the well-remembered anniversaries when this was a season of delight--the eve of promised pleasures, of feasts, of dances, and of presents. With this thought in their hearts they silently kissed their mother, and retired to their little bed, committing themselves to "Our Father who art in heaven," while the poor mother toiled on, listening with dread for the returning footsteps of her husband.

The husband and father, whose return was thus dreaded, had worked late at night in the shop of the carpenter who had given him temporary employment, and who was to pay him this evening. Five or six dollars were coming to him, more than he had earned honestly for a long while, and his hand shook with eagerness as his employer counted out his wages. As he put on his hat to leave the shop, he observed his fellow-workmen, who were all sober and steady men, eying him with sad, inquiring looks; he almost ran out of the shop.

"I know what they mean," he said to himself. "But what is it to them how I spend my money--the prying busy-bodies! I'm not a slave--I have a right to do what I please with my own. Whew! how cutting the wind is! A glass or two of hot whiskey toddy will be just the thing!"

Without one thought of his toiling wife and neglected children, the poor, infatuated man hastened towards a grocery with the intention of slaking his morbid thirst. At the moment his foot was on the threshold, out from the belfry of Christ Church, ringing clear in the frosty air, streamed a tide of sweet and solemn music. Simple, yet touching, was the melody of those sacred bells, chiming forth the advent of the blessed Christmas time. And as the song of the bells fell upon his ear, it awakened in the drunkard a thousand memories of happier, because better days. The comfortable dwelling, the quiet, neat parlor, with its Christmas dressings, the sweet face of his wife, the merry laugh of his bright-eyed children--all flashed back vividly upon his mind. He recked not of the bitter blast--he forgot his late purpose--he could wish those sweet bells to play on forever. But they ceased.

"It was a voice from heaven!" said the man, as the tears rolled down his cheeks. "Surely God has blessed those Christ Church chimes. I'll never more drink one drop. This money shall go to my family, every cent of it. It is not too late yet to buy provision for to-morrow, and some comfortable things for the children."

It was late that night when the watching wife heard the step of her husband on the staircase. It was as slow and heavy as usual; but how relieved, how astonished, how grateful she felt, when the door opened, and he came in, happy, sober, bearing a huge basket filled with provisions, and threw down a parcel containing stockings, comforters, and mittens for the children, not forgetting some simple Christmas wreaths, and some of those condiments which children love.

The next day was a happy one indeed for the mother and the little boys--a merry Christmas that reminded them of old times, and gave them

assurance of a happy future. May we not hope that the effect we have attributed to the Christ Church chimes is not a solitary instance of the power of music?

A Touch of Realism

by Saki, from *Beasts and Super Beasts*

"I hope you've come full of suggestions for Christmas," said Lady Blonze to her latest arrived guest; "the old-fashioned Christmas and the up-to-date Christmas are both so played out. I want to have something really original this year."

"I was staying with the Mathesons last month," said Blanche Boveal eagerly, "and we had such a good idea. Every one in the house-party had to be a character and behave consistently all the time, and at the end of the visit one had to guess what every one's character was. The one who was voted to have acted his or her character best got a prize."

"It sounds amusing," said Lady Blonze.

"I was St. Francis of Assisi," continued Blanche; "we hadn't got to keep to our right sexes. I kept getting up in the middle of a meal, and throwing out food to the birds; you see, the chief thing that one remembers of St. Francis is that he was fond of the birds. Every one was so stupid about it, and thought that I was the old man who feeds the sparrows in the Tuileries Gardens. Then Colonel Pentley was the Jolly Miller on the banks of Dee."

"How on earth did he do that?" asked Bertie van Tahn.

"He laughed and sang from morn till night," explained Blanche.

"How dreadful for the rest of you," said Bertie; "and anyway he wasn't on the banks of Dee."

"One had to imagine that," said Blanche.

"If you could imagine all that you might as well imagine cattle on the further bank and keep on calling them home, Mary-fashion, across the

sands of Dee. Or you might change the river to the Yarrow and imagine it was on the top of you, and say you were Willie, or whoever it was, drowned in Yarrow."

"Of course it's easy to make fun of it," said Blanche sharply, "but it was extremely interesting and amusing. The prize was rather a fiasco, though. You see, Millie Matheson said her character was Lady Bountiful, and as she was our hostess of course we all had to vote that she had carried out her character better than anyone. Otherwise I ought to have got the prize."

"It's quite an idea for a Christmas party," said Lady Blonze; "we must certainly do it here."

Sir Nicholas was not so enthusiastic. "Are you quite sure, my dear, that you're wise in doing this thing?" he said to his wife when they were alone together. "It might do very well at the Mathesons, where they had rather a staid, elderly house-party, but here it will be a different matter. There is the Durmot flapper, for instance, who simply stops at nothing, and you know what Van Tahn is like. Then there is Cyril Skatterly; he has madness on one side of his family and a Hungarian grandmother on the other."

"I don't see what they could do that would matter," said Lady Blonze.

"It's the unknown that is to be dreaded," said Sir Nicholas. "If Skatterly took it into his head to represent a Bull of Bashan, well, I'd rather not be here."

"Of course we shan't allow any Bible characters. Besides, I don't know what the Bulls of Bashan really did that was so very dreadful; they just came round and gaped, as far as I remember."

"My dear, you don't know what Skatterly's Hungarian imagination mightn't read into the part; it would be small satisfaction to say to him afterwards: 'You've behaved as no Bull of Bashan would have behaved.'"

"Oh, you're an alarmist," said Lady Blonze; "I particularly want to have this idea carried out. It will be sure to be talked about a lot."

"That is quite possible," said Sir Nicholas.

* * * * *

Dinner that evening was not a particularly lively affair; the strain of trying to impersonate a self-imposed character or to glean hints of identity from other people's conduct acted as a check on the natural festivity of such a gathering. There was a general feeling of gratitude and acquiescence when good-natured Rachel Klammerstein suggested that there should be an hour or two's respite from "the game" while they all listened to a little piano-playing after dinner. Rachel's love of piano music was not indiscriminate, and concentrated itself chiefly on selections rendered by her idolised offspring, Moritz and Augusta, who, to do them justice, played remarkably well.

The Klammersteins were deservedly popular as Christmas guests; they gave expensive gifts lavishly on Christmas Day and New Year, and Mrs. Klammerstein had already dropped hints of her intention to present the prize for the best enacted character in the game competition. Every one had brightened at this prospect; if it had fallen to Lady Blonze, as hostess, to provide the prize, she would have considered that a little souvenir of some twenty or twenty-five shillings' value would meet the case, whereas coming from a Klammerstein source it would certainly run to several guineas.

The close time for impersonation efforts came to an end with the final withdrawal of Moritz and Augusta from the piano. Blanche Boveal retired early, leaving the room in a series of laboured leaps that she hoped might be recognised as a tolerable imitation of Pavlova. Vera Durmot, the sixteen-year-old flapper, expressed her confident opinion that the performance was intended to typify Mark Twain's famous jumping frog, and her diagnosis of the case found general acceptance. Another guest to set

an example of early bed-going was Waldo Plubley, who conducted his life on a minutely regulated system of time-tables and hygienic routine. Waldo was a plump, indolent young man of seven-and-twenty, whose mother had early in his life decided for him that he was unusually delicate, and by dint of much coddling and home-keeping had succeeded in making him physically soft and mentally peevish. Nine hours' unbroken sleep, preceded by elaborate breathing exercises and other hygienic ritual, was among the indispensable regulations which Waldo imposed on himself, and there were innumerable small observances which he exacted from those who were in any way obliged to minister to his requirements; a special teapot for the decoction of his early tea was always solemnly handed over to the bedroom staff of any house in which he happened to be staying. No one had ever quite mastered the mechanism of this precious vessel, but Bertie van Tahn was responsible for the legend that its spout had to be kept facing north during the process of infusion.

On this particular night the irreducible nine hours were severely mutilated by the sudden and by no means noiseless incursion of a pyjama-clad figure into Waldo's room at an hour midway between midnight and dawn.

"What is the matter? What are you looking for?" asked the awakened and astonished Waldo, slowly recognising Van Tahn, who appeared to be searching hastily for something he had lost.

"Looking for sheep," was the reply.

"Sheep?" exclaimed Waldo.

"Yes, sheep. You don't suppose I'm looking for giraffes, do you?"

"I don't see why you should expect to find either in my room," retorted Waldo furiously.

"I can't argue the matter at this hour of the night," said Bertie, and began hastily rummaging in the chest of drawers. Shirts and underwear

went flying on to the floor.

"There are no sheep here, I tell you," screamed Waldo.

"I've only got your word for it," said Bertie, whisking most of the bedclothes on to the floor; "if you weren't concealing something you wouldn't be so agitated."

Waldo was by this time convinced that Van Tahn was raving mad, and made an anxious, effort to humour him.

"Go back to bed like a dear fellow," he pleaded, "and your sheep will turn up all right in the morning."

"I daresay," said Bertie gloomily, "without their tails. Nice fool I shall look with a lot of Manx sheep."

And by way of emphasising his annoyance at the prospect he sent Waldo's pillows flying to the top of the wardrobe.

"But _why_ no tails?" asked Waldo, whose teeth were chattering with fear and rage and lowered temperature.

"My dear boy, have you never heard the ballad of Little Bo-Peep?" said Bertie with a chuckle. "It's my character in the Game, you know. If I didn't go hunting about for my lost sheep no one would be able to guess who I was; and now go to sleepy weeps like a good child or I shall be cross with you."

"I leave you to imagine," wrote Waldo in the course of a long letter to his mother, "how much sleep I was able to recover that night, and you know how essential nine uninterrupted hours of slumber are to my health."

On the other hand he was able to devote some wakeful hours to exercises in breathing wrath and fury against Bertie van Tahn.

Breakfast at Blonzecourt was a scattered meal, on the "come when you please" principle, but the house-party was supposed to gather in full strength at lunch. On the day after the "Game" had been started there were, however, some notable absentees. Waldo Plubley, for instance, was reported to be nursing a headache. A large breakfast and an "A.B.C." had been taken up to his room, but he had made no appearance in the flesh.

"I expect he's playing up to some character," said Vera Durmot; "isn't there a thing of Moliere's, 'Le Malade Imaginaire'? I expect he's that."

Eight or nine lists came out, and were duly pencilled with the suggestion.

"And where are the Klammersteins?" asked Lady Blonze; "they're usually so punctual."

"Another character pose, perhaps," said Bertie van Tahn; "'the Lost Ten Tribes.'"

"But there are only three of them. Besides, they'll want their lunch. Hasn't anyone seen anything of them?"

"Didn't you take them out in your car?" asked Blanche Boveal, addressing herself to Cyril Skatterly.

"Yes, took them out to Slogberry Moor immediately after breakfast. Miss Durmot came too."

"I saw you and Vera come back," said Lady Blonze, "but I didn't see the Klammersteins. Did you put them down in the village?"

"No," said Skatterly shortly.

"But where are they? Where did you leave them?"

"We left them on Slogberry Moor," said Vera calmly.

"On Slogberry Moor? Why, it's more than thirty miles away! How are they going to get back?"

"We didn't stop to consider that," said Skatterly; "we asked them to get out for a moment, on the pretence that the car had stuck, and then we dashed off full speed and left them there."

"But how dare you do such a thing? It's most inhuman! Why, it's been snowing for the last hour."

"I expect there'll be a cottage or farmhouse somewhere if they walk a mile or two."

"But why on earth have you done it?"

The question came in a chorus of indignant bewilderment.

"_That_ would be telling what our characters are meant to be," said Vera.

"Didn't I warn you?" said Sir Nicholas tragically to his wife.

"It's something to do with Spanish history; we don't mind giving you that clue," said Skatterly, helping himself cheerfully to salad, and then Bertie van Tahn broke forth into peals of joyous laughter.

"I've got it! Ferdinand and Isabella deporting the Jews! Oh, lovely! Those two have certainly won the prize; we shan't get anything to beat that for thoroughness."

Lady Blonze's Christmas party was talked about and written about to an extent that she had not anticipated in her most ambitious moments. The letters from Waldo's mother would alone have made it memorable.

A Christmas Memory

by Charles Dickens, from *Child Life in Prose*

I have been looking on, this evening, at a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas tree.

Being now at home again, and alone, the only person in the house awake, my thoughts are drawn back, by a fascination which I do not care to resist, to my own childhood. Straight in the middle of the room, cramped in the freedom of its growth by no encircling walls or soon-reached ceiling, a shadowy tree arises; and, looking up into the dreamy brightness of its top,--for I observe in this tree the singular property that it appears to grow downward towards the earth,--I look into my youngest Christmas recollections.

All toys at first, I find. But upon the branches of the tree, lower down, how thick the books begin to hang! Thin books, in themselves, at first, but many of them, with deliciously smooth covers of bright red or green. What fat black letters to begin with!

"A was an archer, and shot at a frog." Of course he was. He was an apple-pie also, and there he is! He was a good many things in his time, was A, and so were most of his friends, except X, who had so little versatility that I never knew him to get beyond Xerxes or Xantippe: like Y, who was always confined to a yacht or a yew-tree; and Z, condemned forever to be a zebra or a zany.

But now the very tree itself changes, and becomes a bean-stalk,--the marvellous bean-stalk by which Jack climbed up to the giant's house. Jack,--how noble, with his sword of sharpness and his shoes of swiftness!

Good for Christmas-time is the ruddy color of the cloak in which, the tree making a forest of itself for her to trip through with her basket, Little Red-Riding-Hood comes to me one Christmas eve, to give

me information of the cruelty and treachery of that dissembling wolf who ate her grandmother, without making any impression on his appetite, and then ate her, after making that ferocious joke about his teeth. She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red-Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss. But it was not to be, and there was nothing for it but to look out the wolf in the Noah's Ark there, and put him late in the procession on the table, as a monster who was to be degraded.

O the wonderful Noah's Ark! It was not found seaworthy when put in a washing-tub, and the animals were crammed in at the roof, and needed to have their legs well shaken down before they could be got in even there; and then ten to one but they began to tumble out at the door, which was but imperfectly fastened with a wire latch; but what was that against it?

Consider the noble fly, a size or two smaller than the elephant; the lady-bird, the butterfly,--all triumphs of art! Consider the goose, whose feet were so small, and whose balance was so indifferent that he usually tumbled forward and knocked down all the animal creation! consider Noah and his family, like idiotic tobacco-stoppers; and how the leopard stuck to warm little fingers; and how the tails of the larger animals used gradually to resolve themselves into frayed bits of string.

Hush! Again a forest, and somebody up in a tree,--not Robin Hood, not Valentine, not the Yellow Dwarf,--I have passed him and all Mother Bunch's wonders without mention,--but an Eastern king with a glittering scymitar and turban. It is the setting-in of the bright Arabian Nights.

O, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me! All lamps are wonderful! all rings are talismans! Common flower-pots are full of treasure, with a little earth scattered on the top; trees are for Ali Baba to hide in; beefsteaks are to throw down into the Valley of Diamonds, that the precious stones may stick to them, and be

carried by the eagles to their nests, whence the traders, with loud cries, will scare them. All the dates imported come from the same tree as that unlucky one, with whose shell the merchant knocked out the eye of the genii's invisible son. All olives are of the same stock of that fresh fruit concerning which the Commander of the Faithful overheard the boy conduct the fictitious trial of the fraudulent olive-merchant. Yes, on every object that I recognize among those upper branches of my Christmas tree I see this fairy light!

But hark! the Waits are playing, and they break my childish sleep! What images do I associate with the Christmas music as I see them set forth on the Christmas tree! Known before all the others, keeping far apart from all the others, they gather round my little bed. An angel, speaking to a group of shepherds in a field; some travellers, with eyes uplifted, following a star; a baby in a manger; a child in a spacious temple, talking with grave men; a solemn figure with a mild and beautiful face, raising a dead girl by the hand; again, near a city gate, calling back the son of a widow, on his bier, to life; a crowd of people looking through the opened roof of a chamber where he sits, and letting down a sick person on a bed, with ropes; the same, in a tempest, walking on the waters in a ship; again, on a sea-shore, teaching a great multitude; again, with a child upon his knee, and other children around; again, restoring sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, health to the sick, strength to the lame, knowledge to the ignorant; again, dying upon a cross, watched by armed soldiers, a darkness coming on, the earth beginning to shake, and only one voice heard, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Encircled by the social thoughts of Christmas time, still let the benignant figure of my childhood stand unchanged! In every cheerful image and suggestion that the season brings, may the bright star that rested above the poor roof be the star of all the Christian world!

A moment's pause, O vanishing tree, of which the lower boughs are dark to me yet, and let me look once more. I know there are blank spaces on

thy branches, where eyes that I have loved have shone and smiled, from which they are departed. But, far above, I see the Raiser of the dead girl and the widow's son,--and God is good!

Christmas in the Pines

by Meredith Nicholson, from *Story Hour Readings: Seventh Year*

The sky was clear all yesterday,
From dawn until the sunset's flame;
But when the red had grown to gray,
Out of the west the snow clouds came.

At midnight by the dying fire, 5
Watching the spruce boughs glow and pale,
I heard outside a tumult dire,
And the fierce roaring of the gale.

Now with the morning comes a lull;
The sun shines boldly in the east
Upon a world made beautiful
In vesture for the Christmas feast.

Into the pathless waste I go, 5
With muffled step among the pines
That, robed in sunlight and soft snow,
Stand like a thousand radiant shrines.

Save for a lad's song, far and faint,
There is no sound in all the wood; 10
The murmuring pines are still; their plaint
At last was heard and understood.

Here floats no chime of Christmas bell,
There is no voice to give me cheer;
But through the pine wood all is well, 15
For God and love and peace are here.

Little Miss Sophie

by Alice Ruth Moore, from *Violets and Other Tales*

When Miss Sophie knew consciousness again, the long, faint, swelling notes of the organ were dying away in distant echoes through the great arches of the silent church, and she was alone, crouching in a little, forsaken, black heap at the altar of the Virgin. The twinkling tapers seemed to smile pityingly upon her, the beneficent smile of the white-robed Madonna seemed to whisper comfort. A long gust of chill air swept up the aisles, and Miss Sophie shivered, not from cold, but from nervousness.

But darkness was falling, and soon the lights would be lowered, and the great, massive doors would be closed, so gathering her thin little cape about her frail shoulders, Miss Sophie hurried out, and along the brilliant noisy streets home.

It was a wretched, lonely little room, where the cracks let the boisterous wind whistle through, and the smoky, grimy walls looked cheerless and unhomelike. A miserable little room in a miserable little cottage in one of the squalid streets of the Third District that nature and the city fathers seemed to have forgotten.

As bare and comfortless the room, so was Miss Sophie's lonely life. She rented these four walls from an unkempt little Creole woman, whose progeny seemed like the promised offspring of Abraham,--multitudinous. The flickering life in the pale little body she scarcely kept there by the unceasing toil of a pair of bony hands, stitching, stitching, ceaselessly, wearily on the bands and pockets of pants. It was her bread, this monotonous, unending work, and though while days and nights constant labor brought but the most meagre recompense, it was her only hope of life.

She sat before the little charcoal brazier and warmed her transparent, needle-pricked fingers, thinking meanwhile of the strange events of the

day. She had been up town to carry the great, black bundle of pants and vests to the factory and receive her small pittance, and on the way home stopped in at the Jesuit Church to say her little prayer at the altar of the calm, white Virgin. There had been a wondrous burst of music from the great organ as she knelt there, an over-powering perfume of many flowers, the glittering dazzle of many lights, and the dainty frou-frou of silken skirts of wedding guests filing and tripping. So Miss Sophie stayed to the wedding, for what feminine heart, be it ever so old and seared, does not delight in one? And why shouldn't a poor little Creole old maid be interested too?

When the wedding party had filed in solemnly, to the rolling, swelling, pealing tones of the organ. Important-looking groomsmen, dainty, fluffy, white-robed maids, stately, satin-robed, illusion-veiled bride, and happy groom. She leaned forward to catch a better glimpse of their faces. Ah!--

Those near the Virgin's altar who heard a faint sigh and rustle on the steps glanced curiously as they saw a slight, black-robed figure clutch the railing and lean her head against it. Miss Sophie had fainted.

"I must have been hungry," she mused over the charcoal fire in her little room, "I must have been hungry," and she smiled a wan smile, and busied herself getting her evening meal of coffee and bread and ham.

If one were given to pity, the first thought that would rush to one's lips at sight of Miss Sophie would have been: Poor little Miss Sophie! She had come among the bareness and sordidness of this neighborhood five years ago, robed in crepe, and crying with great sobs that seemed to fairly shake the vitality out of her. Perfectly silent, too, about her former life, but for all that, Michel, the quarter grocer at the corner, and Mme. Laurent, who kept the rabbe shop opposite, had fixed it all up between them, of her sad history and past glories. Not that they knew, but then Michel must invent something when the neighbors came to him, their fountain head of wisdom.

One morning little Miss Sophie opened wide her dingy windows to catch the early freshness of the autumn wind as it whistled through the yellow-leafed trees. It was one of those calm, blue-misted, balmy, November days that New Orleans can have when all the rest of the country is fur-wrapped. Miss Sophie pulled her machine to the window, where the sweet, damp wind could whisk among her black locks.

Whirr, whirr, went the machine, ticking fast and lightly over the belts of the rough jean pants. Whirr, whirr, yes, and Miss Sophie was actually humming a tune! She felt strangely light to-day.

"_Ma foi_," muttered Michel, strolling across the street to where Mme. Laurent sat sewing behind the counter on blue and brown-checked aprons, "but the little ma'amselle sings. Perhaps she recollects."

"Perhaps," muttered the rabbe woman.

But little Miss Sophie felt restless. A strange impulse seemed drawing her up town, and the machine seemed to run slow, slow, before it would stitch the endless number of jean belts. Her fingers trembled with nervous haste as she pinned up the unwieldy black bundle of the finished work, and her feet fairly tripped over each other in their eagerness to get to Claiborne Street, where she could board the up-town car. There was a feverish desire to go somewhere, a sense of elation,--foolish happiness that brought a faint echo of color into her pinched cheeks. She wondered why.

No one noticed her in the car. Passengers on the Claiborne line are too much accustomed to frail, little black-robed women with big, black bundles; it is one of the city's most pitiful sights. She leaned her head out of the window to catch a glimpse of the oleanders on Bayou Road, when her attention was caught by a conversation in the car.

"Yes, it's too bad for Neale, and lately married too," said the elder man, "I can't see what he is to do."

Neale! she pricked up her ears. That was the name of the groom in the Jesuit church.

"How did it happen?" languidly inquired the younger. He was a stranger, evidently; a stranger with a high regard for the faultlessness of male attire, too.

"Well, the firm failed first; he didn't mind that much, he was so sure of his uncle's inheritance repairing his lost fortunes, but suddenly this difficulty of identification springs up, and he is literally on the verge of ruin."

"Won't some of you fellows who've known him all your lives do to identify him?"

"Gracious man, we've tried, but the absurd old will expressly stipulates that he shall be known only by a certain quaint Roman ring, and unless he has it--no identification, no fortune. He has given the ring away and that settles it."

"Well, you're all chumps. Why doesn't he get the ring from the owner?"

"Easily said--but--It seems that Neale had some little Creole love-affair some years ago and gave this ring to his dusky-eyed fiancée. But you know how Neale is with his love-affairs, went off and forgot the girl in a month. It seems, however, she took it to heart,--so much so until he's ashamed to try to find her or the ring."

Miss Sophie heard no more as she gazed out into the dusty grass. There were tears in her eyes, hot blinding ones that wouldn't drop for pride, but stayed and scalded. She knew the story with all its embellishments of heartaches. The ring, too; she remembered the day she had kissed and wept and fondled it, until it seemed her heart must burst under its load of grief before she took it to the pawn broker's that another might be eased before the end came,--that other, her father. The "little Creole love affair" of Neale's had not always been poor and old and

jaded-looking; but reverses must come, even Neale knew that--so the ring was at the _Mont de Piete_.

Still he must have it, it was his; it would save him from disgrace and suffering, and from trailing the proud head of the white-gowned bride into sorrow. He must have it,--but how?

There it was still at the pawn-broker's, no one would have such a jewel, and the ticket was home in the bureau drawer. Well, he must have it; she might starve in the attempt. Such a thing as going to him and telling him that he might redeem it was an impossibility. That good, straight-backed, stiff-necked Creole blood would have risen in all its strength and choked her. No; as a present had the quaint Roman circlet been placed upon her finger,--as a present should it be returned.

The bumping car rode heavily, and the hot thoughts beat heavily in her poor little head. He must have the ring--but how--the ring--the Roman ring--the white-robed bride starving--she was going mad--ah yes,--the church.

Right in the busiest, most bustling part of the town, its fresco and bronze and iron quaintly suggestive of mediæval times. Within, all cool and dim and restful, with the faintest whiff of lingering incense rising and pervading the gray arches. Yes, the Virgin would know and have pity; the sweet, white-robed Virgin at the pretty flower-decked altar, or the one away up in the niche, far above the golden dome where the Host was. Holy Mary, Mother of God. Poor little Miss Sophie.

Titiche, the busy-body of the house, noticed that Miss Sophie's bundle was larger than usual that afternoon. "Ah, poor woman!" sighed Titiche's mother, "she would be rich for Christmas."

The bundle grew larger each day, and Miss Sophie grew smaller. The damp, cold rain and mist closed the white-curtained window, but always there behind the sewing machine drooped and bobbed the little black-robed figure. Whirr, whirr went the wheels, and the coarse jean

pants piled in great heaps at her side. The Claiborne street car saw her oftener than before, and the sweet, white Virgin in the flowered niche above the gold-domed altar smiled at the little penitent almost every day.

"_Ma foi_," said the slatternly landlady to Madame Laurent and Michel one day, "I no see how she live! Eat? Nothing, nothing, almost, and las' night when it was so cold and foggy, eh? I hav' to mek him build fire. She mos' freeze."

Whereupon the rumor spread that Miss Sophie was starving herself to death to get some luckless relative out of jail for Christmas,--a rumor which enveloped her scraggy little figure with a kind of halo to the neighbors when she appeared on the streets.

November had verged into December and the little pile of coins were yet far from the sum needed. Dear God! how the money did have to go. The rent, and the groceries and the coal,--though, to be sure, she used a precious bit of that. All the work and saving and skimping,--maybe, yes, maybe by Christmas. What a gift!

Christmas Eve night on Royal Street is no place for a weakling, for the shouts and carousals of the roisterers will strike fear into the brave. Yet amid the cries and yells, the deafening blow of horns and tin whistles and the really dangerous fusillade of fireworks, the little figure hurried along, one hand clutching tight the battered hat that the rude merry-makers would have torn off, the other grasping under the thin, black cape a worn little pocketbook.

Into the _Mont de Piete_, breathless, eager. The ticket? Here, worn, crumpled. The ring? It was not gone? No, thank Heaven! It was really a joy well worth her toil, she thought, to have it again.

Had Titiche not been shooting crackers on the banquette instead of peering into the crack, as was his wont, his big, round, black eyes would have grown saucer-wide to see little Miss Sophie kiss and fondle a

ring, an ugly clumsy band of gold.

"Ah, dear ring," she murmured, once you were his, and you shall be his again. You shall be on his finger, and perhaps touch his heart. Dear ring, _ma chere petite, de ma coeur, cheri, de ma coeur. Je t'aime, je t'aime, oui, oui._ You are his, you were mine once too. To-night, just one night, I'll keep you--then--tomorrow, where you can save him.

"Ah, the Virgin--she smiles at me because I did right, did I not sweet mother? She smiles--and--I grow--faint--"

The loud whistles and horns of the little ones rose on the balmy air next morning. No one would doubt it was Christmas Day, even if doors and windows are open wide to let in cool air.

Why, there was Christmas even in the very look of the mules on the poky cars; there was Christmas noise in the streets, and Christmas toys and Christmas odors, savory ones that made the nose wrinkle approvingly, issuing from the kitchen. Michel and Mme. Laurent smiled greetings across the street at each other, and the salutation from a passer-by recalled the many progenied landlady to herself.

"Miss Sophie, well, poor soul, not very much Christmas for her. _Mais_, I'll just call her in to spend the day with me. It'll cheer her a bit."

So clean and orderly within the poor little room. Not a speck of dust or a litter of any kind on the quaint little old-time high bureau, unless you might except a sheet of paper lying loose with something written on it. Titiche had evidently inherited his prying propensities for the landlady turned it over and read:

"Louis. Here is the ring. I return it to you. I heard you needed it, I hope it comes not too late. Sophie."

"The ring, where?" muttered the landlady. There it was, clasped between her fingers on her bosom. A bosom, white and cold, under a cold, happy face. Christmas had indeed dawned for Miss Sophie--the eternal Christmas.

God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen

by Dinah Maria Mulock, from *Golden Numbers*

God rest ye, merry gentlemen; let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was born on Christmas-day.
The dawn rose red o'er Bethlehem, the stars shone through the gray,
When Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was born on Christmas-day.

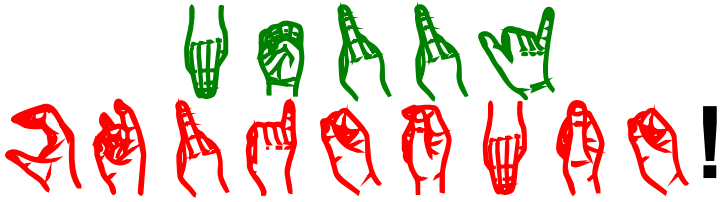
God rest ye, little children; let nothing you affright,
For Jesus Christ, your Saviour, was born this happy night;
Along the hills of Galilee the white flocks sleeping lay,
When Christ, the child of Nazareth, was born on Christmas-day.

God rest ye, all good Christians; upon this blessed morn
The Lord of all good Christians was of a woman born:
Now all your sorrows He doth heal, your sins He takes away;
For Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was born on Christmas-day.

The Gracious Time

by William Shakespeare, from *Hamlet*

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.



2013